DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 352 623 CS 011 120

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TITLE Literacy Development of Urban At-Risk Children through Literature-based Reading/Language Arts Instruction.
PUB DATE Dec 92
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Reading Conference (42nd, San Antonio, TX, December 2-5, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Comparative Analysis; Elementary Education; Higher Education; *High Risk Students; Junior High Schools; *Literacy; Longitudinal Studies; Reading Attitudes; Reading Instruction; Reading Research; Small Group Instruction; Student Attitudes; *Student Development; Urban Education; Whole Language Approach; Writing Attitudes

ABSTRACT

A longitudinal study described the language and literacy abilities of urban at-risk children at several points over a 3-year period; provided the children with small-group literature-based reading/language arts instruction; and compared these children's progress in literacy achievement to other similar groups. Participants in the study were university students enrolled in two methods courses, their two university instructors, and all 300 students in one urban elementary school (K-8) located in a large southeastern city. Data were gathered using both empirical and naturalistic, informal/observational measures. Baseline data gathered during the first month of the study indicated that the children were in much need of rich literary experiences, and that their attitudes towards reading and writing leaned toward the positive. Observation of the children during the first four months of instruction indicated improvements in children's literacy performance. Data gathered during the remainder of the 3-year study will allow a variety of research questions to be answered. (Two tables of base-line data are included.) (RS)

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Literacy Development of Urban At-Risk Children through Literature-based Reading/Language Arts Instruction

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ABSTRACT

Literacy Development of Urban At-Risk Children Through Literature-based Reading/Language Arts Instruction

Purpose

The purpose of this discussion is to present interim results for a three-year literacy research project in progress. The project is a university/public school partnership designed to enhance the language and literacy development of at-risk elementary school children located in an urban setting. The specific objectives of the longitudinal study related to the elementary school children are to: (1) describe the language and literacy abilities of the at-risk children involved at several points throughout the three-year period; (2) provide the children with small group literature-based reading/language arts instruction; and (3) compare these children's progress in literacy achievement to other similar groups who did not participate in this literacy project. Results of descriptive analyses for the baseline data of approximately 200 children in grades kindergarten through sixth are presented. These data describe children's attitudes and interests for reading and writing, knowledge of story structure, reading comprehension ability, decoding ability, status of spelling development, level of reading vocabulary, number of books read, and status of written language competence.

Theoretical Framework

In recent years, the field of literacy education has suggested moving toward more use of children's literature to develop literacy. Recent research provides evidence that reading to children has only positive effects on their literacy development. Exposing children to literature facilitates language acquisition (Cazden, 1981), helps children acquire written language registers (Purcell-Gates, 1988), encourages language play and using language creatively (Glazer, 1991) and is associated with successful school performance (Wells, 1986).

In what is now a classic study, Carol Chomsky (1972) found that young children whose homes provided a greater exposure to books were more advanced in their acquisition of English syntax than those who had more limited exposure to books. Similarly, Eckhoff (1983) found that second grade children who read books with more sophisticated literary language patterns produced similar types of language patterns in their written compositions, while second grade children who read basal readers with more controlled syntactic patterns produced less variety in their compositions. It has been recommended by Tompkins and McGee (1983) that children's literature be used to enhance at-risk students' acquisition of standard English. Juel's (1988) longitudinal study which examined the literacy development of at-risk children in grades one through four suggested that doing more reading, or more listening to books read, is important to acquiring ideas with which to write one's own stories. Roser, Hoffman, and Farest (1990) found

CS011120

impressive gains on standardized achievement test scores (CTBS) for at risk students in the six schools that participated in their Language to Literacy project, a literature-based program. Recently, Morrow (1991) examined the effect of combining literature-based reading with traditional reading instruction on the reading achievement of minority children from low socioeconomic homes in an urban school setting for a one-year period. She found significant differences on measures of oral and written story retellings, a probed comprehension test, oral and written creations of original stories, and on language complexity measures favoring the combination literature-based and traditional reading instruction groups. It would seem, then, that inclusion of children's literature as an integral part of reading instruction has a high probability of benefitting at-risk children in their oral and written language acquisition.

Methods/Techniques

Participants in this study are university students enrolled in two methods courses (i.e., reading and language arts) and their two university instructors, and the entire student population for one urban elementary school (K-8) located in a large southeastern city (of the 300 children, 273 are eligible for free lunch; many live in low-income housing; 80% are African-American; 16% White; 3% Spanish; 1% Asian). After a one-week orientation on campus, the university students are responsible for teaching small groups of at-risk children for the course of the semester. University faculty are also located at the school to conduct methods classes, consult with students and teachers, and guide and supervise the students. The university students meet at the school twice a week, three hours each day. Ninety minutes each day are reserved for course meetings; the other seventy-five minutes are spent implementing instructional lessons with the children for a total of 30 hours over the course of the semester. Each lesson must include use of children's literature related to a grade level theme, and writing. All literature presented is accompanied by visuals (e.g., each kindergarten child held a mirror as he/she listened to Snow White's "mirror, mirror on the wall" refrain), or by appropriate music (e.g., playing Vivaldi's Four Seasons as background for working on a mural illustrating a book about Spring). At every session children either read themselves, or are read to, and engage in dialogue journal writing. Certain assignments are required of all participants (e.g., directed reading-thinking activities; discussing story features and their connections; creative bookmaking; Readers' Theatre; designing and creating wall murals; comparing and contrasting fictional and expository text; and performing student-created, theme-related plays). A typical session includes children reading, rereading, or listening to literature selections; writing or editing a story or a letter; entering "new" vocabulary terms and concepts in context into individual student dictionaries; university students helping children use syntactic and semantic clues to predict and confirm/correct what they read; and children and university students corresponding in dialogue journals.

Data Source

Beginning with the 1991-92 school year, data describing the language and literacy abilities of the at-risk student population is being collected using both empirical, and naturalistic, informal/observational measures. Baseline data on achievement, oral and written language abilities, reading abilities, interests, and

attitudes toward reading/writing is being compiled. Standardized achievement test scores are available in students' cumulative records; oral language samples have been obtained through means of story retellings of children's literature selections chosen to match grade level themes of fairy tales (K-2), magic (3-4), mystery (5-6), and time (7-8); written language samples have been obtained through dialogue journal entries, creative stories, letter writing, and a developmental spelling achievement test. Reading comprehension abilities, as well as knowledge of story structure, will be described through the use of story frame completions following the reading of children's literature chosen to match grade level themes; decoding abilities will be assessed through use of a list of children's names (i.e., "The Names Test" from Cunningham, 1990); and interests and attitudes have been determined through the use of surveys and checklists. These data will be collected each year following the collection of the baseline data in order to make comparisons over the three-year period of the project.

Results

Initial data analyses used both descriptive and correlational statistics. Tables 1 and 2 show the results of these analyses. Examination of these data indicates that at the start of this project the children were in much need of rich literary experiences. Fortunately, their attitudes toward reading and writing lean toward being positive, and generally become more positive with each school year. However, oral language is generally underdeveloped for the children's ages and grade levels. For instance, one of the researchers thought she was reviewing the oral story retelling of a six year old when she saw the number 6 at the top of the transcription page. Unfortunately, the six meant sixth grader. Too many children were unsuccessful in including major elements of story structure in either their oral retellings or in written story frames. Many children were hesitant to write creatively for fear of making spelling errors. They were unwilling to take risks and "invent" spellings either in dialogue journals or in creative story writing.

While this baseline data was collected during the first month of the project, the researchers have already begun to see improvements in the literacy performance of the children after about four months of instruction. The most apparent, based on observation is that the children are more motivated to read and write, they are writing more and taking more risks with their writing, and they are using writing for various purposes (e.g., writing friendly and persuasive letters, poems, creative stories). Additionally, their oral story retellings are improving dramatically.

Educational Significance

The significance of this literacy research project is that it is designed to contribute empirical evidence supporting the benefits of using children's literature in reading instruction, especially with at-risk children who typically have not experienced the advantages that exposure to literature at early ages would have provided toward their literacy acquisition. Assumptions about kindergartners or first graders coming to school already familiar with such classics as Goldilocks and the Three Bears, or Cinderella cannot be made with at-risk learners. Also, it is not enough to recommend that parents and teachers of at-risk learners simply read more to their children. Instead we must look more closely at the school curriculum afforded these at-risk learners. We need to determine which

strategies and activities are most effective with literature-based instruction. The descriptive data collected in this project will allow several important research questions to be answered. These include: What types of literacy experiences are effective with at-risk children? What syntax patterns, patterns of cohesion and coherence, and spelling patterns emerge in the written compositions of at-risk children as they experience children's literature? What language functions are evident in the compositions and oral language of these children? How do their reading abilities change over the three-year period? Do these at-risk children become more interested in reading and writing? Do they develop more positive attitudes? In addition, comparisons will be made across the three-year period in achievement test scores both within the treatment school, and between the treatment school and similar nontreatment schools.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Literacy Attitude Survey - Quantitative Portion

Fall 1991	K	1	2	3	4	5	6
LAS Rec-reational Total	M=34.18 SD=15.64 %ile=72	M=31.71 SD=4.74 %ile=58	M=32.16 SD=8.29 %ile=62	M=32.15 SD=4.78 %ile=63	M=32.67 SD=5.27 %ile=72	M=31.04 SD=4.57 %ile=65	M=31.14 SD=4.54 %ile=69
LAS Academic Total	M=38.47 SD=18.06 %ile=88	M=33.75 SD=8.35 %ile=69	M=33.58 SD=8.04 %ile=78	M=32.56 SD=4.96 %ile=79	M=33.41 SD=5.46 %ile=83	M=32.82 SD=3.37 %ile=90	M=33.45 SD=8.56 %ile=95
Combined Total	M=72.65 %ile=83	M=65.46 %ile=63	M=65.74 %ile=71	M=64.71 %ile=73	M=66.08 %ile=80	M=63.86 %ile=82	M=64.59 %ile=88
n	17	24	19	27	27	28	49

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Baseline Literacy Measures of Urban, At-risk Children

Fall 1991	K	1	2	3	4	5	6
Story Retelling Score	M =1.67 SD=1.66 n=17	M =4.12 SD=2.61 n=24	M =5.63 SD=2.56 n=19	M =3.51 SD=2.22 n=27	M =3.83 SD=2.52 n=26	M =4.63 SD=2.10 n=28	M =4.10 SD=2.49 n=49
Story Retelling Holistic Score	M=1.24 SD=.90 n=17 r=.3175	M =1.71 SD=1.12 n=24 r=.8548**	M = 2.68 SD=1.42 n=19 r=.3180	M =1.67 SD=.83 n=27 r=.9077**	M =1.85 SD=1.22 n=26 r=.3019	M =1.96 SD=0.79 n=28 r=.8482**	M =2.27 SD=1.40 n=49 r=.8638**
Reading Compre-hension	M =15.62 SD=22.13 n=16	M= 43.75 SD=35.55 n=24	M =61.84 SD=40.28 n=19	M =12.52 SD=21.47 n=27	M =29.85 SD=25.74 n=27	M =55.71 SD=24.75 n=28	M =53.61 SD=27.8 n=49
Words Test K - 2	M =1.24 SD=3.58 n=17	M =3.75 SD=3.45 n=24	M =10.26 SD=5.23 n=19	NA	NA	NA	NA
Names Test 3 - 6	NA	NA	NA	M =31.26 SD=25.13 n=27	M =71.00 SD=25.57 n=26	M =71.89 SD=24.31 n=28	M =83.39 SD=20.5 n=49
Spelling Develop-ment	NA	M =0.27 SD=0.88 n=22	M =1.35 SD=1.32 n=17	M =1.89 SD=0.89 n=27	M =3.38 SD=1.02 n=26	M =3.32 SD=1.02 n=28	M =3.73 SD=.67 n=49
Vocabulary Raw Score	NA	M =2.33 SD=4.56 n=21	M =12.67 SD=6.92 n=18	M =11.26 SD=8.51 n=27	M =24.56 SD=14.30 n=27	M =26.61 SD=19.23 n=28	M =29.06 SD=10.2 n=48
Vocabulary Grade Equivalency Score	NA	M = .11 SD=.50 n=21	M =1.28 SD=1.08 n=18	M =1.29 SD=1.22 n=27	M =3.71 SD=2.28 n=27	M =4.03 SD=3.08 n=28	M =4.43 SD=1.63 n=48

r = correlations between the quantitative score (Story Retelling Score) and qualitative scores (Story Retelling Holistic Score). *p<.01 **p<.001